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The Black Shapes

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The Black Shapes

Abstract

The stick breaks. This part. Do you see it, here? It splinters, slivers of heartwood, still wet, thin enough to not hurt at first when they slide under the nail, the rest of the wood discarded, the length stuck deeper, the pink skin turned white then red, then the nail coming off, the air getting somewhere it shouldn't. See how it flaps and then hangs? Shake your hand. The stick breaks—do you see it?

Cover Page Footnote

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The Black Shapes

Nonfiction by Charles McLeod

The stick breaks. This part. Do you see it, here? It splinters, slivers of heartwood, still wet, thin enough to not hurt at first when they slide under the nail, the rest of the wood discarded, the length stuck deeper, the pink skin turned white then red, then the nail coming off, the air getting somewhere it shouldn't. See how it flaps and then hangs? Shake your hand. The stick breaks—do you see it?

Here's where you went, where you came, where I found you. For half your life. For more. My feet are tired. Always the same tall hill, always green, in your head—I know—and you're walking and you're older now and have sewn nothing so there's no wife and no kids and no distractions from the single thought that your lungs will turn off that your heart will turn off that your eyes will turn off that your face will turn off that your legs will turn off and so in your head you're always walking and there's the tall hill, its skin green like the scenes they show on computers, when they go to sleep, that hill, and then I'm on it, a stood, black twig but still a far thing, a cloud, another country's sickness.

Your hope is that it looks like where you used to live, the four mountain ranges, the bountiful valley, the north range shaved flat by eons of wind, its cliffs striated to brown, to pink, to tan, the stripes horizontal. There was a space on the west range that the sun would drop behind in October, a gap in the mesa like a single, missing tooth and for one month the red sun would find that gap and light it, and you and the person you've loved most in the world would sit on your slab step and stare at it, the Rockies

turning purple behind you—you hope that it's the drive west from there, the red dirt and pinions and columns of hoodoos standing in silence for ever and ever, the four-lane empty save for the snap of crow's wings, save for the wind whipping in through your window, the place names—Goblin Valley, Black Dragon Canyon, Ghost Hill—in perfect white on their perfect green signs, the sky blue save for strips of long clouds you can see through.

The music didn't work. They'd gone out. It rained like ribbons, like ceaseless gray strings, the downpour turning the world to a single drab etching; nothing moved right. And you did try, backing up and running at walls, the tan stucco's pebbles sharp then the black bang then the white sun then starlight and you want its freshness, the focus it provides, the pain like warm air pushed from a vent but the heater broke, it's all blank, you're not cells just flat, brown paper that the meat is wrapped in, its juices pooling, blue veins, it makes you sick, a mass of flesh fused to a shorn bone like a sad gift, the rain past the window in ribbons. You were tired of waiting.

On the bridge, your first friend, thin as a pick, you're leaving your shift and he's going to his, you're both in your sad little uniforms, he at twenty-three with the same bowl cut as thirteen years earlier, when you two found the body in the lake, the hand's brown skin stained with a blue like gloom, like a glove you could see through, and that night or one like it his dad's hand on the back of his mom's head, sending her face into the door of the fridge over and over, you and your friend crouched around the corner like cowards, and the sound his mom made, the wail trapped in the grunt, the low moans coating the screams like the blue on the man's hand did—thirteen years later you two stand on the bridge, the cars on the freeway a sound you can taste and he's addicted to coke and you're addicted to booze and you can barely look each other in the eye because you both want to die and don't want the other person to see it, to see you.

Accept it: the snapped stick. That you are lost myth. That you are dead custom. Saving yourself from sickness, you somehow got sick. Can you remember? Ten years, every night. The glass in your hand. The smoke when the bottle was opened. That smoke like fingers of smoke lifting from a fire in a far land where groups sat and each story was sacred. How do worlds end? I'll show you: the single bed in Virginia, your phone turned off, the blood in your veins cold, silver water, the kudzu past the window slipping under the sill, and then over the floor, and then down your throat, wending its way past your lungs, to your heart, until something else was doing your breathing for you, your body broken open so that your skin seeped light and turned to sand and each grain was recast and re-colored. That you died exactly as you were being born. That you both bloomed and withered. But that's over now. When you rip your fingernail off your hand, something happens, but nothing happens.

The gray cat was sitting in ash two doors down and saw you and offered a single sound and you stopped and you crouched and only now do you think that we're all gray cats sitting in ash and we have one sound and hope someone can hear us. It was the big house that had bonfires, the beer cans crushed flat, and the cat had made a nest from the arm of a charred, fabric chair which you knew because it skittered to a stop after coming toward you and ran away and half-hid in the furniture's burnt remnants, three months old, milk-weaned or just kicked out, no room at the nipple and now trapped between your odd clucks and starvation so the next day when it appears on your porch, you open the door and the cat runs inside while you think ahead to that unknown time when the cat's so sick that it won't ever heal, at which point you will take it to the vet, who will kill it.

In Seattle, you lived up the hill from the troll that lived under the bridge, the Bug in its fist, graffiti behind it, the steep walk singeing your hamstrings to crisp, the shift at the restaurant once again over, and in those moments, the night mute, the street glowing wet, you'd gaze at the stone steps that led up to beautiful houses, proud in their shingles, their porch lights turned on, the furniture past their windows fancy and perfect. At the hill's crest was the gas station where you'd buy your booze, the twelve packs again taking all your tip money, and in your rented room you'd drink 'til you puked, offering up to the sink a meek fetid spring of sallow water. Then you'd finish the rest of the can. Then you'd open another.

Sometimes the phlegm sticks longer than you think, you on your back, the cough trapped, your eyes growing as big as the extra syllable in the Dickinson line: *the berry's cheeks are plumper*, the iamb wrecked, a false rise, you hacking on your bed, the ceiling fan spinning and spinning, the arrhythmia you've had for three years changing your body's meter—a strange stressed middle beat rearranging normalcy, *amphibrach* a word like a mythical beast, that can't be but is but isn't, and the trees past your window have white shopping bags trapped on their limbs and they blow like ghosts in the sour-smelling breeze and you think that to die you need only do less, and that in this way death is trochaic.

The black shapes come back. You can't sleep and crawl walking through your four rooms, staring at things that once meant something to you, and it makes you sick that you search for the sentiment in them, but it's past that, too, you can't understand what they mean, they feel like a trick, like a set, like a setting, you smiling in photos, fresh snow on the ground, the person that you've loved most in the world there with you, and it's six in the morning and in two hours you teach and know that by now you can't even get a nap in, the black shapes snapping into the edges of your eyes, a head and a neck and a shoulder, and each time you turn toward them, they disappear, just like everyone else has seemed to.

The world is low green grass and blue sky and even though you're looking ahead, you can't see what it is that's ahead of you, but you're sure you can do it, can press on and press through, that your legs won't get weary that your pace is strong that the soles of your shoes will never wear out the laces tied snug the stitching sturdy, but when you look behind you, I'm down the hill, and when you do it again I'm ten yards behind you. It's this scene that owns you, the grass on the hill, the blue sky and my silent footsteps and the notion that the reason that the grass is so green is people like you lay just beneath it.

You take her to the clinic after school in your car. She isn't your girlfriend. It isn't your baby. She doesn't know whose baby it is: one of ten men, and one of them her stepfather. In a mansion comprising thirty-nine rooms, you sit in a closet and take bong hits. It's Sunday night, autumn. The cold air is here. In the morning is AP French. You're in class together. You ask if she's okay. You say that you have to leave. She begs you to stay, that she can't be alone, in this big house where the man who pretends to be her dad comes into her room and rapes her—and then, she says through a mask of new tears, he leaves me fucking money on the table—money that she's used to kill what she can't keep, and she offers to sleep with you if you'll stay and you hug her and she says please please please and her bedroom has a little balcony on its west end and as you drive away she waves at you from it.

Driving past where the Raiders play, the dog's corpse is heaved from the window of the chromed-out Caddie, the car's paint a bright emerald, its seats chalk white, white as the lines that they draw around bodies. The dog's head hits first and the rest is just physics, cars swerving, a minivan flipping itself over the freeway's metal divider, the creature's furred skin unspooling and then you're past it, still driving behind the bright car, calling the police while you say out loud the license plate number, wondering how it is that each and every part of what just occurred can somehow be a part of reality.

The last time you see him alive he's standing in the kitchen in the same khaki-colored chamois shirt that he's had since your head reached his hipbone. The prednisone has turned his skin paper thin, and on the calves of his legs, below his sweatshorts, is an array of little butterfly bandages. It's late morning and the light's dim and he's standing there, staring at his pill container. You've picked your bags up and will fly back to DC. It's your thirtieth birthday. Forty-eight hours later, he'll go into a coma, dying while you try to make it home, which you learn of while you call your mom from a gate in the Detroit airport, and weep as openly as you ever have, and go to the bathroom, to wash off the tears, and walk past a stall with huge streaks of shit wiped across the wall behind it.

What do you want me to say? There was the stormy morning, you nine or ten and you'd ridden your bike from the house that your parents were renting, Tahoe's tides pushing crawfish to shore near the pier, two tiered at its far end, the lower level where the boats tied up seeing froths of water push and splash through its planks, the thunder loud in the gray mountain sky, the lake roiling. On the beach you pick up the crawfish and carry them back in, wet to the waist, your skin raised from the cold, the creatures gliding down to the lake's churning bottom. You save them for hours. You do this again and again, feeling their feathered gills lift while you cup them in the palm of your hand, their claws breaking your skin, their minds not understanding, and after hours of this they'd arrive dead, limp things that the breaking waves pushed then sucked back.

Is it not clear to you? That it's not about effort?

Charles McLeod is the author of a novel, *American Weather*, and two collections of stories, *National Treasures* and the forthcoming *Settlers of Unassigned Lands*. His fiction has received a Pushcart Prize, won *The Iowa Review's* fiction contest, and appeared in publications including *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Conjunctions*, *Five Chapters*, and *ZYZZYVA*. His nonfiction has appeared in *Hobart*, with the piece being named a Notable Essay in *Best American Essays 2014*.